

CORRESPONDENCE

Help scientists save time for research by minimizing editorial requirements for initial manuscript submission

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In early 2020, after a discussion on our Forum, the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) developed a new resource: the EASE Quick-Check Table.^{1,2} It was intended to make life easier for both authors and editors by helping scientists find the basic information needed for submitting their manuscripts to a journal. The initiative was promoted not only on our website and via our social media but also by other international organizations of editors and publishers.

To facilitate adoption of this idea by journal editors, MS Word files with the blank and complete table were uploaded on the EASE website in May.² A general note at the beginning emphasizes that manuscripts should be complete, concise, and clear (as explained in the *EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators*,³ available in more than 20 languages). The table presents examples of basic information for initial submissions: word limits, title page information, the structure of body text, end matter, and references, as well as notes on submission and journal policy. In version 2 of the table, we added a brief introduction to the table, explaining that journal editors can adapt it to their needs, for example by deleting or adding rows whenever necessary.

This initiative inspired others to share their suggestions for further steps towards making the process of manuscript submission more efficient. For example, in July 2020, Jaime Teixeira da Silva⁴ recommended elimination of pre-submission formatting and cover letters, to save academics their time, energy, and funds if a paper is desk-rejected. Consequently, in August, the EASE Council published a simpler version of the table, to promote simplification of editorial requirements for initial submissions.

Moreover, Hans Oh⁵ suggested elimination of unnecessary requirements and/or creation of centralized websites that serve many journals, facilitating swift resubmissions from one journal to the next (like the Manuscript Exchange Common Approach initiative) or simply universal adoption of a format-free initial submission policy. Besides, research on user experience might identify the most common errors made by researchers during submissions, which could be eliminated by improvements to the software, such as check boxes or radio buttons, drag-and-drop features, and auto-population of required metadata. Additionally, Crossref Similarity Check reports could be routinely used to prevent scientific misconduct. Finally, Oh drew attention to the exorbitant global cost of wasted time and effort spent on meeting unnecessary submission requirements and also the enormous societal costs of delaying important publications because of technical barriers.

In September 2020, Thomas Lang⁶ reviewed the instructions for authors in various journals and showed many examples of unsupported, unclear, or unusually specific requirements concerning initial manuscript submissions. His article, as well as user-experience research, may help journal editors to revise their requirements to make them more user-friendly. This would greatly reduce the excessive bureaucratic workload of scientists and leave them more time for research.

To help spread the word about the urgent need for simplifying the process of submitting manuscripts to science journals, we have asked a team of volunteers to translate a slightly improved version of the table (3.1) into many languages. As a result, MS Word files in 13 languages are already available on the EASE website.² Volunteers who would like to translate the English version into their native languages should first contact EASE Secretary (secretary@ease.org.uk) to avoid duplication.

We hope this campaign will help researchers by saving their time and efforts, and will make scientific communication worldwide more efficient. This is of vital importance given the widespread disruptions due to COVID-19 and the burden imposed by the current pandemic. The initial extra effort by journal editors (in revising their requirements) is well worth it, because the more streamlined process of manuscript submission will help in eliminating many common errors made by researchers and in reducing the number of manuscript revisions.

Author's contribution

I have been involved in planning this initiative, data acquisition and interpretation, manuscript writing, revision, and final approval.

Competing interests

Sylwia Ufnalska reports that she has been a member of the EASE Council for 11 years and has accordingly been reimbursed for the cost of her travel to attend the council meetings. In 2009–2018, she edited the *EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators* (updated annually) as well as formatted and updated their translations into many languages every year but did not receive any honorarium for this work. Her only financial gain for the work on that project and on the EASE Quick-Check Table was that she did not have to pay her EASE membership fees for 2-3 years, following the more time-consuming annual updates to the *EASE Guidelines*. In June 2020, the EASE Council awarded her an Honorary Life Membership in recognition of her outstanding service to the Association.

References

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